



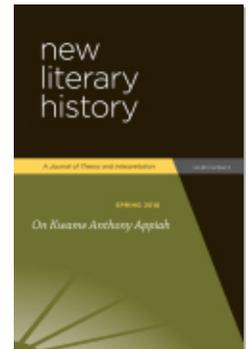
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Kwame Anthony Appiah and Homi Bhabha

The conversation took place at the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University on July 12 2017, after preliminary conversations over the phone. We reviewed the transcripts and exchanged emails about them over a period of weeks in the spring of 2018.

HOMI BHABHA: Anthony, I thought it might be worth starting our conversation with some reflections that reach back to your earlier work, particularly on the question of honor in the current political situation.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: This is a very sad moment for honor, but also a moment that demonstrates its power, because what I am most conscious of among my friends, and those people whose tweets I read, and so on, is a sense of collective shame, a national shame, in the United States. And to some extent I thought the same thing when looking at responses to the Brexit vote in England among my friends and family. And correspondingly there was a sense of pride in France when they did the right thing in seeing off Marine Le Pen in the presidential elections in May 2017, or indeed in the Netherlands, where they similarly kept Geert Wilders away from power in the March 2017 elections. These are very powerful political emotions: shame and pride.

The way to understand honor is that some people have a right to respect, either in virtue of something they've done, as when we give people honorary degrees, or in virtue of some status that they have, as when we give honor to certain offices. We call judges "your honor," and that isn't just a form of words; you have to behave with appropriate deference to a judge while she's acting as your judge. There is a structure of rights to respect, which is contingent upon a role. And so the judge has no special standing when we're at dinner together, only when she's in the court. Or honor is earned by achievement, not necessarily moral achievement: we honor great athletes and scientists and artists and writers.

And then there's another kind of honor that is central to moral life, but that we don't call honor anymore. We call it dignity. What distin-

guishes dignity from these other terms, though this is not how it was conceived in the eighteenth century, is that it is something that you get by being a person. In that sense, it isn't earned; it's a fundamental entitlement to respect. Some of the forms of respect that people are owed in virtue of their humanity are laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where they're entitled to family life, they're entitled to a whole range of rights, and treating them with dignity is granting them the rights that they're entitled to. There are some forms of respect that we're just entitled to as persons, whereas others are forms of earned respect. Now, many people don't like the word honor because it has a kind of snobbishness to it . . .

BHABHA: In attributing honor, or giving respect, it's important to preserve your distinction between the "office" and the "person." In the best cases they converge: we respect the person who holds the honor of the office, *and vice versa*. What happens when well-earned respect—official or personal—turns into the exercise of illegitimate power and undue entitlement? When the honor of the office protects the failed leader, honor hardens into hierarchy. That's when we are gripped with collective shame, and a strange sense of hopelessness saps the active citizen.

It's interesting that we are moving from honor and respect to dignity, which provides the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with its moral imperative. Whereas honor establishes subtle distinctions based on achievement and merit, isn't it the purpose of dignity, in its modern form, to assign respect to the inherent condition of being human, not to the achievements of personhood?

APPIAH: Yes. With regard to dignity, our word obviously comes from the Roman word *dignitas*. And that was, by definition, something that only some people had. And what we've done is to democratize it, to say it isn't just the privileged few who have this entitlement. So, I want to hold on to that earlier thought—that people have distinctive rights to respect—and not lose track of this basic idea in our proper concern not to enshrine illegitimate forms of hierarchy. We don't want to lose track of the fact that some people are better at physics than others and some are better novelists than others. I don't claim to be anywhere in the great hierarchy of poets, and I would think it very odd if someone thought there was something wrong in granting C. K. Williams, or some other distinguished contemporary American poet, a form of respect I'm not entitled to.

So we've got to acknowledge—this is a very Confucian way of putting it—that there are legitimate forms of hierarchy. Some of them are contextual and functional. We need somebody to be in charge. We need a general if we're going to have armies; we need judges if we're going to have courts; we need teachers if we're going to have classrooms; and

in all these places, for functional reasons, certain people are entitled to forms of respect.

BHABHA: No question, there are legitimate forms of hierarchy that provide our institutions with leadership and give society its direction and stability. But as we have started our conversation with the moral and political significance of honor, I cannot help but think of the widespread dishonor prevalent in political discourse today. I am talking as much about political policy as I am about public address.

In many countries—I know India and the United States best—a democratically elected “legitimate” hierarchy actively uses the institutions of governance to *legitimize* political rule through dishonor and disrespect. Donald Trump is the most egregious example, but think of [Rodrigo] Duterte, [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan, [Jacob] Zuma, [Benjamin] Netanyahu, and several others who are less prominent. Trump’s dishonorable ranting legitimizes an informal culture of abuse and humiliation in the name of populist nationalism that must “go barbarian” to ensure its electoral success. This is not my description, but Steve Bannon’s. Something similar is happening in India, where a majoritarian nationalism based on Hindutva fundamentalism emboldens gangs of “cow vigilantes” to wreak violence and death upon Dalits and Muslims by claiming that that these minorities kill cows for food or profit.

Discrimination and dishonor are joined at the hip and often share the same speech acts. Both have minorities in their sights, but there is a subtle difference in the way in which they work. Discrimination tends to be institutional and systemic; it is associated with rights—inequality, injustice—for which there is often a legal or quasi-legal remedy. Dishonor is verbal, visual, figurative, discursive; it tends to be informal and extra-institutional, less about rights and more about cultural representation. Dishonor is often protected by “free speech” and only inadequately regulated by “hate-speech” legislation. And apart from these juridical matters, what is most insidious about dishonor is that it hits at the very grounds of citizenship.

What I’m getting at is visible in Trump’s odious lexicon of disrespect. Phrases like “grab them by the pussy,” “shithole countries,” “sons of bitches” (to describe black football players who “took the knee”), Mexican “murderers,” and Muslim “terrorists” are not merely foul abuse, or locker-room banter. Body parts, excreta, criminality, animality—these disfigurements of disrespect are not only attacks on identities or differences. Their goal is to place minorities beyond the pale of citizenship by repeatedly relegating them to an irredeemable “second nature” that denies them the capacity to be bearers of human rights and fully participant, active citizens. They must be policed or disciplined because they are considered

to be inherently “out of control.” When we conflate discrimination and dishonor we lose sight of their double existence: dishonor may be the “unconscious” of discrimination’s weak and vicious reason.

Discrimination at least recognizes a “person” who must then be encased in the hierarchy of caste, patriarchy, class, or color. The dishonored are given no such personhood. They are denied the capacity to be bearers of citizenly rights because they are slavishly bound to their “second natures,” which are anachronistic, presocial, and primitive, and which preclude them from being recognized as “subjects” in the sense defined by the Rights of Man, leave alone the Rights of Citizens. You could say that the dishonored are suspended in a precarious liminal space between animality and humanity, between bestiality and civility. This is why dishonorable discourse is shot through with perverse, persecutory affects—dismembered bodies, waste, fear, insecurity, sexual violence—that accompany but outweigh the “reasoned” (even if entirely irrational) language of discrimination.

Discrimination relies on a biopolitics of calculation and quantification to make its case: quotas, statistics, numbers, ratios, etc. Whereas dishonor is a biopolitics of affect: anxiety, fear, death, destruction. Hannah Arendt has a passage in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she tracks the affective and ethical degradation of Jews—as liars, usurers, rapists, ghetto rats—who, once they are thoroughly dishonored, are stripped of their citizenship just before they face the final solution.

Let’s return to dignity after dishonor. What do you make of the dignity of the “person” as the cornerstone of rights in the Universal Declaration?

ΑΡΡΙΑΗ: The language of the Declaration starts by announcing that these rights are grounded in the dignity of the person, but the authors don’t tell us what it is about a person that entitles her to forms of respect; nor, until they start specifying rights, do they tell you what these forms of respect entitle you to. And historically, there have been enormous variations, both in the forms through which one expresses respect and in the features of people that have been held to entitle respect. So, the English gentleman in the eighteenth century was entitled to respect by virtue of his birth, and connection with the power of the state, and the role of gentlemen in the court and in warfare. There’s evidently no achievement in being born into an upper-class family, and nothing legitimate to be gained by assigning special rights to respect to its members or by denying them to what used to be called the “lower orders.” And once we think more deeply about the notion of human dignity, we see that it can be a kind of placeholder. The use of the singular—human dignity—suggests it might be, so to speak, one thing. But there are many things that need to be respected in people. People need love, for example, and so we have to treat them as the kind of creatures that need

to be loved. And what does that mean? Well, to understand that, you have to think about all the forms of love: agape, philia, eros, and so on.

BHABHA: Absolutely. Dignity is a placeholder in the UDHR and yet also the foundational moral value on which “rights” are grounded. And it is somewhat anomalous to have dignity function as both a placeholder and a principle. Are we speaking too much in the shadow—or the light?—of dignity as enshrined in the language of rights? People don’t live by rights alone. Perhaps the problem of “rights” is that they cast the concept of well-being in terms of the protection of economic, social, and cultural needs and pay scant attention to respect for human desire, which, like the forms of love you mention, is integral to dignity and freedom. I am thinking, for instance, of Arendt’s insight that the very idea of freedom evokes in us the desire for free movement. But perhaps we are now exiting the remit of the language of rights, which focus, for good historical reasons, on the protection of the rights of individuals and less on the ethical relations between them.

One more thought on the distinction between respect for the office and the person. How do we recover the respect for the “office” when the office bearer demeans the office and, in the process, causes injury to the integrity of the institutions of governance? The current administration in Washington appears to exercise a form of rule (or misrule) via leaks, Twitter handles, and unattributed reports. It makes a mockery of “transparency” when the rantings of presidents and the “alternative truths” proffered by press officers obscure our knowledge of the workings of the state.

APPIAH: It’s important in the United States’ context not to lose a sense of what is and isn’t new. Disgraceful behavior was a feature of political office holders in the early republic and throughout the nineteenth century. People in office have always done appalling things. One of the things about the early American republic is that, despite all the rhetoric of the democratic revolution, the government was in the hands of gentlemen. And so the ethos of gentlemanly respect was central to the ways in which people conducted themselves in Congress—both in terms of things like dueling, which, of course, lost us Alexander Hamilton, but also in terms of the ways in which disputes occurred in Congress, not necessarily amounting to duels, but often ending in physical violence, as one of the things that goes with gentlemanly honor. What’s happened is that we’ve finally—not entirely but to a high degree—completed a trajectory of democratization: there’s dignity, which everybody has, and then there’s official honor, but there’s no personal honor, especially in the political sphere. It seems almost entirely to have disappeared. People who use the rhetoric of honor—military officers like John McCain in the Senate or religious officials in the Mormon church like Senator Orrin

Hatch—have managed to behave in ways that violate the traditions of personal honor so absolutely that it's hard to keep track of what this language could mean anymore.

Now part of that is good because we're now required to think of people as not having honor in virtue of some hereditary status, but in terms of what they've earned. But what's striking about political life today is how many people are willing to do things that earn them shame, things you would only do if you didn't care about your own honor. Why that's happened and why it's quite as pervasive as it is now is a very interesting question. Technology is probably part of this story. There was some charisma and mystique associated with people in high office in the past because we didn't really know them as persons, only as officials. We didn't know President John F. Kennedy was tomcatting around while he was president. Whereas now we have this world in which nobody has secrets and if somebody looks respectable, people assume it's just a facade. And so we lose the sense that there's a standard to be maintained because we don't believe that anybody is living up to it.

BHABHA: No personal honor in the political sphere—I couldn't agree more. My version of this is that we are living in a post-guilt society. There is a brazen flouting of public standards because, as the thinking goes, some individuals and institutions are *just too big to fail*. In these supposedly globalizing times, profits are so large, risk is so profitable, and power so vastly enhanced by new technologies that to game the system is seen as an act of courage, imagination, enterprise, aspiration—a bet on the ever-expanding, yet-to-be realized possibilities of the future. Almost an Icarian ambition.

In India, for instance, titans of industry default on mega loans to national banks and then take refuge in foreign countries, often with the covert connivance of government agencies. From their opulent pads in Mayfair or Manhattan, they appear on local Indian television channels as celebrities who claim to be victims of political vendettas. And, indeed, some of them probably are. But that's the point. Personal honor and political power are now emmeshed and entangled in ways that make it difficult to think of charisma in a positive sense—the moral charisma of Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi is, of course, a thing apart, which is why we return to them so frequently. But, in the very recent past, Michelle and Barack Obama managed to project a vision of the importance of political morality and personal probity going hand-in-hand. The Clintons just don't do it for me . . .

I must mention Angela Merkel in this regard. She is hardly charismatic in the conventional sense, but her leadership in the midst of the migration crisis was exemplary. As in all such emergency situations, there are bound to be failures of judgment and implementation, but Merkel has

left the rest of Europe far behind at a time when the largest impact of these crises of displacement falls predominantly on neighboring states in Africa and the Middle East that can least bear the burden.

For all their brave talk, the line-up of inflated male leaders who dominate the world today—Vladimir Putin, Trump, Erdoğan, Narendra Modi—are makers of miasma, not charisma. A fog of war emanates from their divisive ethnic-nationalisms, and they rise from the conflicts they generate like saviors on a mission to make India or America or Turkey “great again.” Mr. Modi publicly beats his sixty-four-inch chest to assure his audiences that he is their shepherd and their soldier; Mr. Trump rises from the wreckage he produces like a “very stable genius”; and Mr. Maduro leads straggling and starving Venezuelans toward the final “Bolivarian revolution.”

Let’s turn from the leaders to the led. There’s a lot of talk about populist nationalism, but little attention is paid to the “movement politics” that drives it. In India, the ruling parliamentary party, the BJP, is driven by the agenda of the grassroots RSS (youth wing), which is the standard-bearer of Hindutva fundamentalism and the prime agent of anti-Muslim aggression. In the United States, Trump is in thrall to the alt-right, Breitbart, Fox News, and the Federalists—his shameful prevarication on the KKK outrage in Charlottesville speaks loud and clear. In Britain, the Brexit movement, initiated by the nationalist far-right, gathered momentum across parties and split the country. These leaders project themselves as iconic embodiments of their political movements; they are frequently administratively inept while being adept at making grandiose statements to their followers on Twitter or at mass rallies. These movements resonate with the character of “tribal nationalism,” as Arendt describes it: “Politically speaking, tribal nationalism always insists that its own people is surrounded by ‘a world of enemies,’ ‘one against all,’ that a fundamental difference exists between this people and all others. It claims its people to be unique, individual, incompatible with all others, and denies theoretically the very possibility of a common mankind long before it is used to destroy the humanity of man” [OT 227]. There’s something going on today that is different from the “swings” associated with party politics. Our national divisions don’t follow conventional party lines; they resemble fault-lines that shatter public opinion in strange ways and create unexpected alliances.

For me, the most intriguing demographic fault lines in the last United States election were visible in the votes of educated white women who voted twice for Obama and then switched to Trump. What seems like a clear shift from the Democrats to the Republicans is more complex. According to the polls most of these women were deeply ambivalent and

split, while eventually coming out for Trump. As women, they deplored his verbal abuse and his dishonoring of women and refused to condone it as “boy talk”; as wives and mothers, they were gravely concerned about unemployed husbands and household debt; as voters, they preferred the shoot-from-the-hip “outsider” with commercial expertise (mainly on *The Apprentice*) and a self-advertised disdain for the ways of Washington (whatever that means). One must factor into this a general distrust of Hillary Clinton, who was regarded as an entitled “insider” with a tin ear, *and was a woman to boot!* My point is simply that “movements” have a way of organizing discontent and overriding doubt—contradictions, ambivalences, and inconsistencies—by focusing on “a world of enemies,” national and international.

APPIAH: I don’t have quite as well-developed views as you do, but there’s no doubt in my mind that in a whole bunch of cases—and that includes the white working and upper working classes in the United States, but also a lot of people in India and in the Muslim world—we are seeing a response to a sense of historical humiliation. It’s objectively the case that their material conditions and, indeed, the cultural and symbolic conditions of much of the white working class, have either stayed steady or declined over the long haul since the Reagan period in the United States. And that all the promises from the political elites have produced nothing for them. I think the sense of malaise may be exaggerated; some good things have happened over the last thirty or forty years. Not everything has gone downhill. More people have access to health care; the internet has changed lives for the better as well as for the worse, no doubt. Nonetheless, one of the reasons why people feel a sense of malaise is a judgment that is, as it were, not just about the content of their own condition, it’s a relative judgment. Others—the famous one percent—are moving forward, we are not. These are the people who rightly feel shut out.

BHABHA: I think historical humiliation is a key fact in the discontent and violence that afflicts the global world. Vast differences in scales of privilege and well-being are visible in most regions. Humiliation may be a specific form of resentment created anew by global injustice. The limits and failures of global practices are frequently attributed to regions that are considered to be recalcitrant or resistant to the pace of progress dictated by globalization. Questioning the paradigm of global “progress” from the perspective of the persistence of inequality, poverty, disease, illiteracy amongst the majority—despite a healthy bump in middle-class consumption—is often dismissed as an anachronistic, even luddite, position assumed by those who refuse to free themselves of the Westphalian nostalgia for national sovereignty.

In a post-guilt world, dishonor consists of shaming those whose lifeworlds are dismissed as “failed states” or “shithole” societies. It is commonplace to associate terrorism with humiliation, as the 9/11 report does; but humiliation is unproblematically related to a lack of economic opportunity and social enterprise. This is only a part of it. An instrumental end-oriented approach does not even begin to appreciate the grinding, quotidian process of historical humiliation. Shame is an affect of powerlessness that insults your identity and undermines your agency. If you are excluded from the promise of global progress *in the present*, why would you not seek your selfhood in a theocratic creed that provides you with a lineage of belonging antagonistic to capitalist “modernity” (often caricatured) and a habitus of honor like the Caliphate (quite unrealistic)?

APPIAH: Yes. And, again, modern media makes this very visible: you can see how people live in places you don’t live, and you have a sense of a vast gap. But people don’t generally know how vast it is. Most Americans are aware that there is a fair amount of inequality, but if you ask them to gauge it, they almost always understate it. It’s not just that there are huge gaps—everyone now knows this—it’s that they’re far bigger than they used to be.

BHABHA: We used to think of movements as very progressive things: the Black Arts Movement, anticolonial movements, the women’s movement, the gay rights movement. Movements were often associated with leftist political parties, but their agendas were protean, open to “the politics of difference.” Movements were often paradoxical political bodies: they focused sharply on specific “subjects” (identities, interests, communities), while widening their disciplinary frameworks of understanding. These movements had one foot in civil society and another in the university, and they produced “public intellectuals” who attempted to bridge the gap between academia and activism. My impressions are shaped by developments in England from the late ’80s, but I was wondering whether my impressions resonate with yours?

APPIAH: There’s no doubt that around the time we went to college, in many parts of the world, there was a shift in what people thought the university was supposed to do. It was taken for granted in the Cambridge of the mid- to late ’60s, before things shifted, that you came to get what was on offer. Wherever you came from, you weren’t there to bring something to the place, it was there to give something to you. And then, in the late ’60s and early ’70s, the political movements forced the university to open its doors, first, of course, in many places to women, but then to racial minorities and eventually to people from other countries and so on, internationalizing as well as extending the range of class identities and ethnic identities at home.

In the first phase, these people were supposed to come in and just take what had always been offered, and therefore, in some sense, to become like the people who'd been there all along. This was when Jews in the United States, for example, began to have a significant presence in the higher echelons of university—Lionel Trilling and then Harold Bloom, for example. Trilling ended up looking like all the WASPs; he wore the same tweed jackets. He wasn't there to Judaize the institution, he was there because it was no longer the case that being a Jew was an obstacle. But neither was it an asset; you didn't have anything to bring. That's in the '40s and '50s.

But in the '60s and '70s, a lot of people come in and say: why are we accepting this? You're telling us that the ways of the old WASP—upper middle class, Protestant, white, tweed jackets, particular table manners—that's where everybody should have started. We need to distinguish. Nothing wrong with Shakespeare; we're not going to reject Shakespeare on the grounds that he was appreciated by the WASPs. But we're not going to take it for granted that everything that they valued is valuable, nor are we going to accept that the things associated with our identities are *prima facie* valueless.

And so you get this massive reconfiguration, which I certainly remember participating in because I arrived in the United States in the late '70s. I was a visiting graduate student at Yale, and they had just started the first graduate program in African American studies. The undergraduate program was up and running, and from the early '80s I was director of undergraduate studies in African American studies. And I watched this development occur in parallel with the rise of feminist work in a whole bunch of domains and the rise of women's studies. And then I remember in the mid '80s witnessing the massive resistance at Yale to attempts by people like John Boswell to institutionalize gay studies in the university. Now, of course, that battle has been won, but it took a while. By the '80s there was this sense that identity was no longer something to be stepped over in order to participate in the life of the university, in the Arnoldian sense of the best that had been thought and said.

So no longer were the old identities peripheral, derogated, downplayed by the dominant forms of identity. It wasn't just that they were no longer an obstacle, they were now an asset, partly because people came to see that identities came with distinct kinds of experience and different stakes, and that scholarly life was enriched by enlarging the range of experience and by looking at it from different viewpoints, with different things to win and lose. That's all good, because it's true that you learn more things if you have an intellectually diverse institution—an identity diverse institution, but also one that's intellectually diverse. But it also

has risks. And one risk is that instead of seeing that distinct identities come with the possibility of different input, different experiences, and so on, you simply claim authority by virtue of your identity to declare things to be the case about your kind in your situation.

Now that's never going to be good at a university. It's always going to be necessary for authority to be questionable, for people to say: On what basis do you believe that? Show me the evidence. Make the argument. Let us see why you say this. And if you allow people to stand up and speak "as an x," grant them the authority to speak as an x in a way that is unquestionable by anybody who's not an x, then you lose something very valuable. People exaggerate the extent to which this has happened, but it does happen, and we should try to rein it in where we see it.

Those whose identities got the biggest bang for their buck, as it were, were associated with social movements: women, black power, gay rights, and so on. The point about the movements that were institutionalized in the university is that they were all about—I would use a very old-fashioned word here—liberation. They were about undoing unwarranted disadvantage, about freeing people not just to think more freely, but to bring their own resources to bear, not to feel that they had to hide aspects of who they were in order to think. Not every movement outside the university is in the service of liberation, and it doesn't follow that the institutionalization of any movement that comes along is going to be a good thing, especially if the movement is built around not positive resistance and affirmation of an identity, but resentment. I'm not denying that there were elements of resentment in these other movements, but that wasn't what they were fundamentally about.

BHABHA: Yes, they were largely about liberation. But the price of liberation is often a struggle with resentment. The road to emancipation is rarely free of the culture wars—the ancien régime pitted against the *nouveaux philosophes*. The culture wars of the '90s highlighted an important problem. In their attempts to gain voice and visibility, liberation movements often fostered identitarian concepts of agency. That is to say, identity politics was considered to be the most effective way of constituting a resistant political community.

In some cases masculinist ideas of militancy reproduced patriarchal structures within liberatory movements; in others, a hierarchy of "relevance" might relegate gay rights or migrants' interests to the bottom of the agenda. What seemed to get lost was the idea that "rights" are relational, that negotiating identity is most effective as an intersubjective, intercultural process.

APPIAH: Charles Taylor has been very good at expressing this idea in terms of the dialogical character of identity. Identity is never possessed

only by those who have it. It's always constituted in dialectical processes with others. And so you never fully own your identity; it's owned by the system.

BHABHA: Taylor's work on the politics of "recognition" has been rightly influential. I do have one issue with dialogism, Anthony. The dialogical frequently assumes a symmetrical relation between the subjects involved in the dialogic relationship. Asymmetrical conditions are not significantly factored into the dialogical character of identity or the speech act. I find Arendt's account of alterity as the difference *within* each identity a more useful starting place for the dialogical relation. She says something like "alterity is the "otherness within my one-ness." This shifts the terms (and subjects) of the negotiation from sovereignty and certitude to solidarity and vulnerability. An element of ontological "doubt," I always think, enhances an open and empathic dialogue.

APIAH: It's certainly more useful descriptively and analytically. Taylor's point is a normative point, which is that ideally, you want to have a dialogue. That is, you want it to be the case that you're speaking on terms of rough equality with the other. And if you have, as you always do, asymmetries of power—

BHABHA: Or status, or literacy, or discursive influences.

APIAH: Or material stuff—whatever the inequalities are, the normative point is you need to take them into account as you engage with people. You need to think: What is it about my situation that undermines the possibility of an equal exchange here? Is there anything I can do about it? Sometimes there isn't, and you're just trapped by the historical situation. I grew up in a place where there were still people around who had been slaves in Ghana when they were born. And the experience of that makes it almost impossible to develop a proper self-respect. (I mean, people differ, so some people *do* escape the psychic undermining in the way that Frederick Douglass escaped it in the United States.) You interact with some people and you think: I'm never going to be able to turn this into a vis-à-vis because you have been damaged by what history imposed upon you. I don't want to be Pollyanna-ish about it, but it's a good ideal when we are interacting through our identities to bear in mind the different ways in which our identities are structuring the interaction. I mean that when inequality constrains dialogue, we can do our best to overcome the challenge.

BHABHA: I'm trying to think through your very suggestive remark: "It's a good ideal when we are interacting through our identities to bear in mind the different ways in which our identities are structuring the interaction." However fierce the debate, however severe the critique, the parties to the argument or negotiation must be able to agree upon what I am calling a "framework of intelligibility" that inscribes the asym-

metric into the normative condition of dialogical understanding. My sense of “understanding” connects both its meanings: “to understand” is to comprehend or to recognize; to *come* to an understanding is to work through the dialogical process to achieve a negotiatory disposition. I suppose I am throwing my weight behind the ongoing dialogical process (rather than focusing on outcomes) as transforming the norms and rules of engagement. This discussion of dialogical ethics reminds me of the course you teach for NYU Abu Dhabi . . .

APPIAH: The idea of the course is to spend time looking at philosophical work of a broadly normative kind in three traditions. The so-called Confucian tradition, which just means the Chinese tradition. A set of Muslim philosophers going back to the European Middle Ages, but also looking into the legal traditions of Islam to think about politics and moral responsibility. And then a package that includes John Stuart Mill and what we might call Liberalism with a capital L.

So that’s the first task. The second task is to think about global inequality and gender in the light of these traditions. My fundamental thought is: we are doing this, not because the Chinese value Confucius and we want to be nice to the Chinese, but because we have the hope that we will learn things that we wouldn’t learn any other way or wouldn’t learn as well. And the obvious example, I think, in the Confucian case is that much of the ethical-philosophical tradition that one is familiar with, if one does Western philosophy, is very bad on the question of how relationships matter to moral life. And that’s at the center of Confucian thinking. We are always thinking of ourselves as fathers and daughters, emperors and subjects, friends, older brothers and younger brothers, neighbors, and so on. We’re always embedded in these relationships. That is a deep insight about human moral life, that the most powerful, the clearest sense of what one ought to do derives from thinking, “That is my brother, that is my father, this is my friend, this child is in my care,” and the things that flow from that. Confucian traditions are fantastically powerful here. I don’t mean to say there isn’t anything in Western philosophy on this topic; Aristotle says a lot about friendship. So does Montaigne and so on. But friendship largely disappeared in the early twentieth century in anglophone philosophy. It didn’t disappear entirely, but it wasn’t very evident.

BHABHA: To hear you talk of family relations as the matrix of our moral ideas reminds me of the important part your father plays in your account of a grounded cosmopolitanism. Family obligations can be onerous, [and] they can strain your patience and your loyalty, but (at best) they teach you the discipline of dealing with the “given”—you may not fully embrace it but you cannot erase it. *It’s there*. My mother often says

to me, “*You’re not just my son, we’re friends. . . . We’ll be there for each other.*” What sound like clichés often say more than they are allowed to mean.

My mother wants my inevitable presence—the “thereness” of kinship, the continuity of generations. But she also desires the risk and respect of friendship—the contingency of love and care that comes with the discovery that the stranger becomes your friend because she is *not* related to you. My mother wants both filial obligation and coeval recognition. And what is true of my mother in one direction is true of friends in another—at least in Bombay. And I try and create this graft of friend/family around my hybrid dinner table wherever I live—I am a committed multi-cuisinist!

APIAH: Bernard Williams has a nice passage where he talks about someone who sees some people drowning, one of whom is his wife, and he’s thinking about it in a kind of utilitarian way. And Williams says that this person is having one thought too many. The right thought is, “That’s my wife.” That’s the only thought you need in that context about getting something done. And it’s also not about rules. There isn’t a *rule* that says you have to save your wife first.

BHABHA: This course you’re teaching on comparative normative traditions—Confucian, Muslim, liberal—might well be catalogued as a “global” course at many universities (although perhaps not at NYU). What are the theoretical concerns or programmatic requirements that have to be met in titling a course “global?” What is the frame of reference that achieves the global gold standard? Is the “global” a means to knowledge or a measure of its scale? Too many questions to answer, but since they are provoked by our conversation, I thought I might ask them.

APIAH: You might think that if you start talking about the global, it is because you’re looking for a consensus, or a solution, or a shared something or other. This course is not about that; it’s saying, these are powerful ways of thinking about the world from different places, but you cannot turn them into one picture. My tendency is to think it’s useful in approaching the world to have all these different pictures available, and to have a dialogue among them, or a conversation among them, but not because we are looking for agreement. We’re just trying to see what can be illuminated. One of my experiences in having taught this course a few times is that I see weaknesses in traditions that I grew up with academically, which in principle I could have identified without this help. But it really sharpens one’s grasp of the weaknesses to see another tradition, which also has its weaknesses, which I could then begin to identify as I learn about it.

BHABHA: I think we are now talking about the global curriculum in a dialogical spirit. I love the idea of finding common ground by estab-

lishing a convergence based on “weakness” or vulnerability, rather than the self-avowed strength of a canonical tradition. This would certainly be interpretational good practice, as I see it. Beginning from a space of doubt or uncertainty—whether it’s epistemological, ontological, ethical—engages you in a critical process of cultural translation rather than cultural appropriation. Cultural values that seem incompatible and cannot be worked *through* (Benjamin’s *untranslatability*) have to be worked *around*. I like your “hermeneutic of weakness”! It allows us to go beyond the parallelism of comparative scholarship and aspires to an ethical and conceptual proximity—the shared fate (and faith) of what is contradictory or vulnerable and, for that reason, convergent. Doesn’t this make for a kind of “friendship” between ideas and individuals?

Let’s move from Abu Dhabi to Harvard. In both places, at very different times, you’ve been involved in establishing the academic agenda for relatively new programmatic initiatives: global studies and African American studies. How does the African American field look to you now?

APPIAH: There are different things going on under the broad rubric of *Africana* and African American studies. What I got involved with and what interests me is an approach that stresses the American: we are educating people in these United States. They may have come from other places, but they are here. I began (this was in the early ’80s) thinking about this as a matter of asking: What should one know if one wants to try and make sense of—not the racial situation in the United States, because that involves many more things than black and white—but the situation of black people in the Americas? What does one need to know? Many of our students didn’t have a sense of the way the history of this country looks if you focus on the African experience in the Americas. One has to remember that in the early 1980s, most people, educated Americans, weren’t reading African American texts. They weren’t reading Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois, they didn’t yet have all of Toni Morrison to read. (Not that I want to suggest that Morrison’s oeuvre is completed! I very much hope that it isn’t.)

In that process of defining a set of things in a curriculum that you want to explain—slavery, emancipation, Reconstruction, the end of Reconstruction, the Great Migration, the civil rights movement, and so on, and then the important texts in that process—discourse arises around them, and then you become more and more disciplinary because there’s a secondary body of material that you have to know about. If I think of myself as having made any contribution, it was to insist that we should think about the race concept as an historical artifact, in particular its American manifestation, since we were doing African American studies, but also as part of a global conversation about physical difference.

Though there was a field created, and though there is therefore a quasi-disciplinary structure, it's best when it remains open to transdisciplinary and at least to interdisciplinary interests.

That's very different from the approach in my ethics course where I'm not trying to define a field. The world gives us the problem, which is how to live together. Here I'm interested in bringing together bodies of knowledge to address questions we want to think about. What matters about global inequality? Who's responsible for what? What should we be doing about it? What would be a just world in relation to questions of gender? There's a Swedish conception of such a world; there are Muslim feminists who would say that's not our conception, and so on. I have a view, but I'm not interested in taking sides, but rather in trying to understand the views and see what I learn from looking at them.

BHABHA: That's what I meant by convergence. Because you converge, it doesn't mean that you are part of either the same body of knowledge or the same framework of values. It is the fine balance between what is different and what can make a difference that is important.

APIAH: One of the pleasures of teaching in this institutional context is that less than fifteen percent of the students in Abu Dhabi are, I think, Americans, and less than fifteen percent of them are from the Emirates. Last term I had a Nepali, an Uzbek, a Czech, and an African American in Abu Dhabi, and then in New York three Chinese, a bunch of people from other places, and some regular Americans, as it were. The Chinese students, though they don't know a lot about Confucianism, do think of it as theirs. They have a different investment in that part of the conversation, just as the Muslim students feel, well, we're now studying these very sophisticated intellectual traditions of the Muslim world, and they're mine, even if I may not entirely agree with them. That also gives some energy to the teaching in the sense of different people claiming identifications. And what you have to say to the young Jewish New Yorker who's enjoying all this and thinks of him or herself as speaking for the liberal tradition is: no, they don't get to speak for the Muslim world and you don't get to speak for the liberal. You get to speak for *you*. You get to claim the tradition and to articulate it, but you're not the voice of a liberal tradition, or the voice of Confucianism, or the voice of the Arab world. The first thing I say to my students is that a tradition is not a set of agreements, it's a set of arguments and texts and disagreements. And the three sets of traditions I'm talking about, none of them are national; they are regional.

BHABHA: Yes, regional . . . and diasporic. I like the way in which you define a tradition as a kind of dialogical exercise. I would like to add "memory" to your list of tradition-setting attributes. Many of the argu-

ments we have about the compatibility of traditions are couched in terms of atavistic nationalisms, *as if* they are the arbiters of value and truth. The regional is a much richer territory for illustrating the convergence of knowledges and peoples.

APPIAH: And this is something that I've always admired in Du Bois. It turns out that, at least with the questions I'm interested in, the national is almost never very useful for anything. Even as Du Bois was trying to understand the situation of the Negro in the United States, as he would have put it, he discovered that the German perspective that he learned from his education was profoundly helpful. And that he, for example, could see things about the relationships between Germans and Slavs, or between gentile and Jewish Germans, that they couldn't see as clearly. The world is, and has been for so long, connected in ways that mean you cannot give a good story about anything interesting that stops at a modern national boundary.

BHABHA: I could not agree more. That's one of my attractions to [Joseph] Conrad, [J. M.] Coetzee, and even [V. S.] Naipaul.

APPIAH: Conrad never has a novel in which there aren't people of many nations.

BHABHA: And you can hear the palimpsest of French and Russian and Polish in Conrad's English prose, as if his language is itself caught up in an ongoing process of verbal and cultural translation. It is also true, of course, that Conrad's cosmopolitan conversations have very few significant voices from the regions and nations in which he sets his stories—no significant African presence in *Heart of Darkness*, as Chinua Achebe once pointed out. Conrad's notorious stylistic obscurity is a sign of his imaginative daring. His restless narratives are embedded in the very midst of hearts of darkness in London, Brussels, Costaguana, or the Congo, and from that obscurity he builds a picture of the ethical and political vulnerabilities that nagged at the heart of the *grands projets* of great imperial powers even at their most vainglorious.

And as far as Du Bois goes, we're on the same page. My Du Bois lectures at Harvard were titled "*Du Bois, Du Monde*," and you generously introduced the first lecture. . . . But to move back to Dubai for a moment: would you consider your course as part of a cosmopolitan curriculum?

APPIAH: Yes, for the following reason: in the etymological sense, cosmopolitanism is about what it is to be a citizen of the world. Theresa May and in his own, even less clearly articulated way, Donald Trump resist the thought that we should ask ourselves the question of citizenship in the world. But certainly the kids who come to Abu Dhabi do so because it's a question for them. They're going to be Nepali, but they want to figure out what it is for a Nepali to be politically responsible in

the world. So the course is part of the development of a curriculum for cosmopolitanism, for people thinking about moral and political engagements that don't just relate to their fellow citizens of their home state.

BHABHA: The questions for the cosmopolitan citizen are something like: What are the grounds on which you stand when you assume you're "standing" as a world citizen? Is the cosmopolitan world just a *mélange* of diversity and plurality, or do the fault-lines of difference demand the hard labor of cultural translation? Living and working in the interstices *between* cultures and traditions makes us aware of the complex relationship between material objects or ideas and their symbolic circulation. The ubiquitous symbols that we easily recognize as a "brand identity" (I am using this metaphorically) across regional markets signify disparate and distinct symbolic and material values when they are embedded in a specific habitus (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense).

APIAH: I think that this is a key point for thinking about the global circulation of symbolic culture; what connects the sign across different places is just the materiality of the sign. It is the Coca-Cola bottle, or the notes on the Beethoven score, or the copy of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The object travels—the abstract object in the case of the novel, which is instantiated over and over again in many copies—but what it does, what it means, varies. It is one thing in Igboland in Eastern Nigeria where Achebe came from, and something else in Ghana, and in New York City one thing, and in Poughkeepsie something different. But that's true, as you said, about global capitalism too. What Coca-Cola is selling, when it sells a bottle of Coca-Cola in Ghana, is a token of the same abstract material type, but it does different work. I like to point out to people that, at a respectable funeral in the United States, you wouldn't serve Coca-Cola. At a funeral in Ghana, if you don't serve Coca-Cola, you are not at a respectable funeral. One could think of endless examples of this sort of thing. Think of the circulation of telenovelas, or the way in which Bollywood is received in Kenya. In every case, there's a material thing that circulates, but what it is doing is different. And this is what we humanists do; we notice these things.

BHABHA: At an Irish wake, you wouldn't dare serve Coca-Cola; even the corpse would stand up and scream!

I have tried to develop a concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism. It's an idea that I owe to the lifeworld of migration, where to be a diasporic "citizen of the world" is an activity driven by survival—economic, political, cultural—not sovereignty. Citizenship, for the vernacular cosmopolitan, is a quest for political and economic security in conditions of duress or distress—[Julia] Kristeva calls it wounded cosmopolitanism.

I don't want to suggest that it's all diasporic doom and gloom, or migrant malaise. And that's why I see it as a vernacular deviation from

a “standard,” which nonetheless maintains a dialogical relationship with it (in the sense in which we have been talking about dialogism). The vernacular as dialect is not merely subordinated to the dominant discourse; it represents a subaltern agency of translation. The “native” tongue (*vernaculus*) gives voice to a speech community that resists the authority of the lingua franca while translating it into its own terms, for its own purposes.

Postcolonial writers and thinkers have a vivid capacity to speak truth to global power. And they do so because they speak neither for the nation nor the globe; their purview is the colony, the city, the neighborhood, the region—and more recently, the refugee camp. These places are smaller than the globe and less sovereign than the nation, but more complex in their scale, more densely peopled by liminal lifelines. We become aware increasingly of vernacular cosmopolitanism—a cosmopolitanism of necessity, rather than free choice. To survive, people have to learn new moral idioms, strange habits of life, and vernacular ways of speaking and living.

APPIAH: And they value them. They want them. What you’re stressing is something it is important to resist: the equation of the cosmopolitan with what I call platinum frequent flyer cosmopolitanism. First of all, many platinum frequent-flyers are not remotely cosmopolitan. They have never converged with anything. Second, some of the most convergent people, those who are picking up on things from places that they didn’t start out from and doing things with them, are indeed refugees, forced migrants. Filipinos, or mostly Filipinas—in Hong Kong, or in Singapore, or increasingly, the United States—they are not platinum frequent-flyer people. They do have legal freedom of movement very often, but they don’t have practical freedom of movement because it’s too expensive to go to the places they want to go to, like back home.

But they are doing what cosmopolitans do; they are living and working with cultural and symbolic materials that didn’t belong to them when they started out, and taking pleasure and profit from it. And here I think of two people in the town I grew up in. One was the Queen Mother of Ashanti, the most elite possible person, and also the least cosmopolitan person I’ve ever met. She had access to whatever resources she wanted, she didn’t want to go anywhere else, and when you came to see her, she didn’t ask about the world you came from; she told you about what was going on in the world she lived in. Not remotely cosmopolitan. Across the street, when I was growing up, there was a man who had more than one wife and many children, one of whom helped, as a boy, to look after my father when he was dying. He’s now a Japanese citizen, the first Ghanaian to get Japanese citizenship. To acquire Japanese citizenship, you have to establish that you are enculturated: you have to be able to

write and speak Japanese up to a level that they like, and your neighbors in the community where you live are asked about whether you're a good citizen. And he's married to a Japanese woman.

BHABHA: Is that why he went?

APIAH: No. He went there and then he found her.

BHABHA: Why did he go to Japan?

APIAH: Because he was curious and that's where he ended up, and he found something to do, and then he found a wife, and he decided to stay. But his willingness to take up stuff from elsewhere was a feature of *him*, because he has brothers and sisters who haven't left town. And they're not in the same way engaged with the world. I mean, he didn't finish high school, so he was not, by Ghanaian standards, highly educated. So you have these two: a very elite person, who is completely unc cosmopolitan, and a man who wasn't of the lowest level of our system, but definitely nowhere near the top, and yet was able to take on new cultural material. He does not speak very good English because he didn't need to. When he needed to speak good Japanese? Boom! He could do it. And, like many cosmopolitans, he has not lost touch with home. He's building himself a house in Kumasi where he grew up, he wants his kid to go there, he wants to keep in touch with his family. The idea that he's rootless is completely wrong. He is as rooted as you could possibly be; he's just not living where his roots are. But he has not lost the language, and he has not stopped caring about what goes on back home. We need more of these vernacular cosmopolitan stories, because we already have the story of the grand tour.

BHABHA: One of the things I want to raise is the price people have to pay for the cosmopolitanism they acquire. Family forms are often broken, and it's even more poignant because, as you say, there is an attenuated attachment to "back home." Vernacular cosmopolitanism frequently breaks up families—your example of the Filipina—while the tax-exile with the platinum frequent-flyer card may be the least cosmopolitan person around. And I wonder how these two different forms of global forms of living will settle in. Of course, in between them there are people, like your neighbor's family who have not moved.

APIAH: And yet they will change, because they now have a Japanese citizen nephew. Certainly, most things are easier if you have more money. One of the challenges of holding family forms together and living the life that makes sense to you in diasporas, or in refugee status in forced migration, whether it's across a national border, or just internal displacement, is that it often goes along with material deprivation. As human beings, we are embedded in webs of significance, and people are increasingly being translated from one set of webs to another. It's work; it is challenging. It may also be fun . . . but it's not easy. And so people

are facing a combination of those cultural challenges, combined with material challenges, which makes their lives hard. On the other hand, I think that a kind of cosmopolitan openness sometimes helps deal with the material difficulties.

BHABHA: Thinking about those specific material difficulties that are impinging on higher education, what was your impression of the condition of literary studies during your time as president of the MLA? When you are dealing with an organization of that scale, do you spend much of your time putting out fires?

APPIAH: The things I learned most about during my two stints on the executive council and finally as MLA president were the changing material conditions of literary studies: the massive rise of adjuncts and the so-called precariat. We have to accept that if you change the terms of work for teachers of literature in these radical ways, it's bound to affect what goes on. Insecurity isn't the best kind of context in which to pursue either teaching or research.

BHABHA: And the anxiety of adjunct status can hardly encourage untenured colleagues to intervene confidently in institutional crises . . .

APPIAH: Yes, especially because literary studies has, for complicated reasons that Cornel West talks about in his book *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, taken over the Socratic role. The role of the annoying local critic of the institutions of society, which was once played in America by philosophers, by the Deweys and the Jameses, was, starting roughly in the generation of Trilling, taken over by literary studies. This is in a society that has never been terribly tolerant of its critics. Maybe no society is tolerant of its critics, but the United States on the one hand has a kind of rhetoric of first amendment freedoms, but on the other hand can be quite conformist and punishing.

Tenure is a good idea for the quality of this critical work because without that security, people will be less likely to perform it; they are taking risks for their families and material conditions of a sort that one ought not be exposed to. The literary profession is full of people who, despite these difficulties and some of them without the protections of tenure, are doing fantastic and ever-changing work. New issues come in all the time in a high velocity way in literary studies more than in some other areas. It is very, very important that we focus on doing what we can to secure the material conditions within which people do intellectual work for the sake of their students and the society that we live in, which needs that critical self-understanding, in order for us individually and collectively to live the best lives we can.

BHABHA: Cutting the humanities "down to size" is no easy matter. We are not vertically integrated. At our best, the humanities hold together

like an intricate mosaic. A liberal arts education forms a “whole picture” only because humanistic disciplines are assembled from pieces that are asymmetrical and associative—our identity is convergent rather than causal. Our strength lies in being adjacent; our pedagogy is dialogical. We need to challenge ourselves with a double-espresso or triple-espresso version of interdisciplinarity in which the intellectual excitement lies in asking interstitial questions or posing bridging problems that depend for their validity on concepts, methods, and materials that emerge in the process of construction rather than in the affirmation of established foundations. Many of our students, at all levels, want to work in unexplored areas that occur in the interstices of disciplinary boundaries and departmental domains. Too often, unfortunately, our institutional structures present obstacles to such convergent projects that are considered to fall short of proven professional expertise.

The challenge for us is to think outside cozy interdisciplinarity: not art historians with people in literature and then somebody in religious studies. That’s on a continuum. We do have to maintain disciplinary training of some kind, otherwise you’ll never be able to pass it on to other generations.

APIAH: Well that’s right, because in the old model of graduate training you were trained in the discipline, and then you were sent off to a department. People who do things like neuroethics or evolutionary criticism, where they have to study in departments that don’t normally talk to each other, are hard to find jobs for. In my field of philosophy there’s lots of work, and has been for decades, at the interfaces with machine learning, neuroscience, linguistics, and so on. That can fit, to some extent, within the disciplinary frame of philosophy because of the way philosophy is organized.

And this kind of convergent work, which brings [together] disciplines that don’t normally talk or don’t have a standard way of talking to one another, needs to be assessed for its real intellectual value, its value to the culture and to each of us, not just for its role within the university. We need to separate the question of graduate education in the humanities from the question of preparation for teaching in humanities disciplines. One of the ways in which we are a civilized society still, though this may be about to disappear, is that we remain convinced that undergraduate education is a preparation for living, not for a job. Just as a serious humanities education at the undergraduate level is a wonderful preparation for a life that includes work and a career, so is a graduate education in humanities. There are people with good PhDs in all sorts of fields who are contributing in Silicon Valley, in foundations, in businesses, as lawyers, and so on.

If there aren't jobs for all the people who want to be academics, we need to be honest. We have to say: I can help you write a great dissertation, be prepared to be a scholar in your field, but I cannot promise that you will get a job as an academic. I do think we're training too many people, not because it's not valuable to get training at the graduate level in humanities, but because graduate students think they're going to get jobs that they're not going to get. If the deal were to treat graduate training as an extension of the liberal education that has been our model, then it would be fair enough, provided we were honest about it. The difficulty is that it's a big commitment of time and it's very hard to predict job possibilities. I have no idea how many jobs there will be in English or in the United States seven years from now, let alone in forty years.

We should also be clear that one of the pressures is not about the market and whether people are going to have good jobs. It's a political problem. We are a more divided society than we were when I came here in the '80s. I saw some polling in the last few days where nearly sixty percent of Republicans (not even of people who describe themselves as very conservative) think that, on the whole, universities are bad for society. Why do they think that? Well, that question wasn't asked, but my guess is they think that if you go to college you get the wrong values: you challenge, you question, you criticize. You are "un-American" because you question whether the United States has always been a force for good in the world.

BHABHA: Universities, in this view, are seedbeds of unpatriotic dissidence.

APPIAH: Large parts of our university system are funded by politicians because the money comes from state legislatures, and all of us, whether we're private or so-called public schools, are deeply dependent upon federal government support: science funding, so long as it exists, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and public foundations. If a significant part of the society becomes convinced that the universities, and especially the humanities, are enemies of good values, then no amount of its being true that an education in humanities is a great preparation for life is going to counterweigh that. My view is that this decline in enrollments is partly based on families' and students' misunderstanding of prospects in different fields, and partly it is the result of a very strong focus on earnings after college produced by large amounts of student debt. So it is to do with the structure of financing undergraduate education as well as the result of this particular attack on the universities. All of which is to say we have several fronts on which to work.

One of the things that the National Endowment has done historically

is support state humanities councils, which take professors into the small towns of North Dakota or rural Connecticut. They discuss a passage, or a painting, or a historical episode, and show how to make sense of it. Of course, people who come to these events are self-selecting, but those who do think it is wonderful.

BHABHA: This is commendable, and I am sure enlightening for the audience. I worry a little that this kind of entirely well-meaning activity creates an impression that the humanities are a form of cultural philanthropy—a civilizing mission. An academic leader once told me how disappointed he was with humanists who worked on racial violence, informational ethics, or climate change, because the humanities ought to ponder larger issues of life, death, and love . . . “those eternal questions”!

APPIAH: There is a great remark made by a guy from the Fermilab to a senator. He was coming for funding to Congress, and the senator said to him: I want you to tell me that the work you are doing will support the defense of the United States. And he said, Senator, I cannot tell you that the work I am doing will contribute to the defense of the United States. What I can tell you is that it will make the United States more worth defending.

BHABHA: That is very good.

APPIAH: Part of the problem is that the university—this is true globally, by the way, not just in America—rides, where it is supported, on the raft of a not-very-clear understanding of what’s going on across the board. We need to insist—and when I say “we” I mean the physicists as well as the philosophers and the literary studies people—on the intrinsic interest of what we are doing, on the fact that it matters to understand these things because understanding is what human beings live off.

BHABHA: Absolutely. Particularly the humanities, which are text-based, historically embedded, and demand sophisticated interpretative practices—the more you try and instrumentalize humanistic disciplines the less people see their intrinsic value. And the crucial values of careful reading and public reasoning need to be protected in the face of the incivility that is unleashed by our leaders. I am less bothered by the fact that Trump tweets—he’s incapable of a sustained argument—and more disturbed by his ability to set the daily agenda as candidate and president.

This is also true of things that go “viral” in the night, stir up a lot of dust, and then meet a quiet death at dawn. Does this result in overload or amnesia? It’s almost as if frenetic informational activity encourages deep passivity. I sense a danger that these rapid-response communications will reduce public conversation to a toxic mix of unreflective opinion and dubious information. Forgive the spleen . . .

APPIAH: Twitter is a very new technology, historically speaking, and one of the great challenges is to learn how to adapt political institutions to

new technologies. In the eighteenth century, with the rise of the press, people had to learn how to relate it to their political values. Now, at that time, in a place like England, hardly anybody had the vote so it was a small group of people. But through the nineteenth century, as the franchise increases and as literacy grows, a whole world of writing and interpretation develops that is used by people in order to develop the political life of a complex, increasingly democratic society.

We haven't figured out what to do yet with this new technology. I agree that the way it's functioning now, with our very peculiar president, is very unhelpful, and in a way that is embedded in a broader unhelpfulness: how notions of fact and sensitivity to evidence and reason and argument have been undermined; where people feel increasingly entitled to hold on to whatever view they want by carefully curating the sources that they attend to. Which, of course, means that there is no shared public . . .

BHABHA: Right. The early years of the newspaper in England also spawned the coffee house culture, which contributed to the creation of the concept of the public sphere. It's ironical that despite the communal culture of chatrooms and Facebook, we lack a sense of a shared public sphere. An age of immediate and increased connectivity encourages a highly individualized view of public address.

APPIAH: The public is addressed individually, but also in a niche way. It used to be that, roughly speaking, there was a party of the left and a party of the right, but they had a shared sense of what the world was like, though they had different views about what was worth doing. It would be progress in the United States today if everybody could agree that there's a problem with global warming, and there were different views about what to do about it; but we can't even get to the point where we agree that global warming is a problem. Or that human activity is relevant to it. And that's in part because a significant part of the population has been manipulated into wishful thinking by people who have very straightforward material interests in the coal industry.

BHABHA: There are exceptions to the "niche public." Social media have been very effective in creating flash mobs and activating "insurgent publics." I am thinking of the extraordinary gathering of women against exploitation and assault in the workplace #MeToo. But going back a while, also the Arab Spring (Tahrir Square) and the Occupy movement. They owed their physical presence to virtual media.

APPIAH: And yet one of the things that is disappearing is a commitment to the process. The sense that, to put it in slightly grandiose language, we are running this democratic republic together; we the people do not agree with one another about everything, but here's what we agree to. We have a compact to run the system together in a certain way. I

think that's fraying. Political stability is a magical thing, and you do not want to let it slip away because it's really hard to figure out how to get it back. At independence in Ghana we inherited the levers of the colonial state. And we had to learn what they could and could not do, and it took us a while. I like to remind people that Kwame Nkrumah won the independence parliamentary elections with a massive parliamentary majority. But only eighteen percent of the population voted for him because most people didn't vote at all. Of course, if you've never been asked to vote before, why would you? Then we had all these coups, and it took us forty or fifty years to get to the point where we had the mechanics running, so that you could switch from one party in power to another without soldiers being involved, one government to another without soldiers being involved, and then back again to the old governing party. So that you could have two-party politics and elections and people feeling, well, I am not messianically invested in this, but I care about the outcome, so I will show up.

BHABHA: To be committed to the process, as you put it, there must be some confidence in the legitimacy, and legibility, of democratic rule. When you lose your sense of the "common good," public virtue flags. You are left with the husk of a self-interested tit-for-tat democracy. The lack of "transparency," at a time of unprecedented digital dissemination, destroys our faith in the democratic process. We discover through WikiLeaks that Trump Tower—aka the White House—*may* have been open to Russian interference in the elections. The Indian government's ill-advised demonetization policy, avowedly an anticorruption measure, *may* have been timed to disable the opposition parties in the UP elections. The gravest implication of the Mueller investigation is that democratic "legitimacy" may itself be a façade for alleged acts of illegality. We return to the importance of process, which you raised earlier. It is faith in *process* that creates a "shared public" that vigilantly protects its right to participate.

APIAH: Legitimacy is a really important thing. For example, because of the way our Constitution is constructed—with the Senate being an antimajoritarian institution—and because of the distribution of population in the United States, we will soon be at a point where two-thirds of those senators are going to have the support of something like twenty percent of the population and they will have a majority in the Senate. Then the question is, at what point do people start saying, we are no longer invested in this constitutional compact? The delegitimization of Obama was a stage in this process, but it started earlier. There was a corresponding, as it were, liberal delegitimization of the second Bush, which was grounded in real things: he did bad stuff—being dishonest

about the pretexts for the invasion of Iraq, for example—and he wasn't elected in the most straightforward way in the first place, since, like Trump, he lost the popular vote, and *Bush v. Gore* looked to some like a coup by the Republicans on the Supreme Court. But people responded as you do when you believe in the basic system. They said, well, that's unfortunate and it could have gone the other way, but still, we accept it. Again, you can do that once or twice, but certainly in terms of delegitimizing the system, we have fantastically unpopular institutions. The Supreme Court is the most popular of the three branches, but it is less popular than it used to be; Congress is unbelievably unpopular, though people often like their own congressperson, and so on.

It's hard to blame the press for challenging the legitimacy of the current president because he is so incompetent and so deviant from what we thought were the norms of political discourse. But nevertheless, even though I think the criticism is warranted, I worry that we will lose a sense of the institution as legitimate and entitled to respect. The office can be damaged by those who hold it.

BHABHA: Quite literally, at the moment. The Oval Office is a family affair! And much of the work of the state happens in the bedroom late at night when the phone lines burn and the Twitter handle is spun for all its worth. The kitchen cabinet consists of Fox News and other alternative truth aficionados.

Can the office recover its dignity? I worry that there is a growing acceptance of the language of dishonor as a sign of being free of the political machine and speaking to the masses in a language “they” understand—an utterly disrespectful and devious assertion. Alternative truths, in the service of disrespecting minorities, are broadcast across the world. The rot starts at the grassroots. Listen to a local government officer of the BJP circulating an alternative truth about the Muslim festival of Eid: “On Bakra Eid, a son was to be sacrificed, but he was replaced by a sheep. But this is incorrect. If you can't sacrifice your son, then you have no right to sacrifice another creature.”¹

APPIAH: On a more hopeful way of thinking, one thing tweets do is draw attention to another new form, the podcast. There are more and more podcasts, which have interesting formal properties. Because they do not have to fit into a time slot on a radio station or on television, they can be five minutes, or seven minutes, or four hours, or as long as they need to be for their purpose. And they are often discussions where people go back and forth and where people challenge one another. And I think also that the current American crisis or the current Indian crisis could lead us to see things in perhaps too tight a temporal focus. Over the longer haul, I suspect, social media like Facebook could play a

role, as it started to do in the Arab Spring, even though, in the medium term, I agree, that it was a failure. But it could have succeeded, I think. And in Tunisia, where it started, they got rid of Ben Ali and instituted a new, more democratic (if flawed) regime. This is how we can use these new technologies in positive ways to enrich our political discourses and enhance our lives. It's very easy . . .

BHABHA: To be dismissive. So here's my experience of what a "digital commons" might look and sound like. In Bombay this morning, I just read another online article about Muslims being lynched by Hindutva cow vigilantes. Embedded in the piece is a link to "Strange Fruit" sung by Nina Simone. Like many others in India who share this horrifying dawn, Simone's voice serves as witness and warning. The distance between rural India and the American South collapses in a matter of seconds, and the cycle of guilt and shame encircles the race-caste violence of both nations. For those of us who stand in despair, there emerges a convergence between electronic print and lamenting song: what our eyes refuse to believe, appears vivid to the ear. . . . Our new technology, known for its speed and obsolescence, is not free of the venerable problems of the cunning of history.

APIAH: And—to return to the point about working with many pictures—we need to keep a balance between urgent questions, because in the moment something is going on, and longer-term questions. It's possible that we will draw back from what looks like an abyss, that the system will sort itself out. Of course, it is also possible that it won't. It may be that some of the technology is the problem, or that it will be used to find the solutions. My basic philosophical temperament involves a combination of a hopeful view of humanity with a recognition of our deep flaws: I think we can only move ahead if we can see ourselves warts and all. The great lesson, for me, of the work I did on honor was that it can lead to the most awful things—like honor murder—but if we understand it, it can also help to lead us away from them.

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NOTES

- 1 Usha Thakur (BJP MLA from Indore) on Eid ul Adha, September 25, 2015.